

Comments

Edited by Professor John Ford
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The subject for this issue's Comments section represents a significant departure from what we have previously published. *International Journal of Advertising* Editor, Douglas West, recently presented awards for reviewing excellence to two members of the Editorial Review Board, Barbara Stern at Rutgers University and Albert Caruana at the University of Malta. It was our feeling that their views on the reviewing process would be of interest not only to potential contributors, but also to other members of our Editorial Review Board. Having been a reviewer for a number of journals over the past 20 years, I am always happy to see how others approach the reviewing process.

We can always learn from the best. Barbara posits a meaningful series of steps in the review process from an assessment of the references to a final evaluation decision, while Albert discusses the particular challenges faced by every reviewer. Albert stresses the need for the reviewer to put themselves in the mindset of the authors and to allow time after the initial completion of the review to think over the suggestions for the authors before sending them out. We hope you will find these essays both informative and valuable. These different perspectives are really quite complementary. As always, we would welcome your comments at ijacomment@warc.com.

The art of reviewing *by Barbara Stern*

I consider being asked to review as an accolade for expertise, a debt of honour owed to the profession and an opportunity to improve my own research. Of course, it is time-consuming, but a major reward is the opportunity to enhance my own research and writing skills – every manuscript conveys information about good and

bad research, marketing one's own work and avoiding fatal flaws.

Perhaps the most artful part of a review is the beginning: I try to keep in mind the lesson from my days as an English professor – say something kind about every paper. The justification is that a paper is someone's intellectual offspring and harsh criticism damages the soul. To avoid this, I now follow the *Journal of Consumer Research* requirement that reviews be no more

than one page long. Limiting oneself to the essentials not only curbs the reviewer's spleen, but also enables the authors to work through problems on their own – comparable to teaching hungry people how to fish rather than giving them a fish for one meal.

I first turn to the references section, which reveals the quality of the paper's scholarship. What I'm looking for here is the relevance and thoroughness of the references in order to determine the solidity of the paper's scholarship. If the cited works are skimpy, derivative or dated, the scholarship is unlikely to be sophisticated enough to contribute to the field. Insofar as advertising and marketing are eclectic theory-borrowers, I expect the references to indicate that authors have consulted original sources, not merely secondary ones. A chronological trail from foundations research to current adaptations is a proxy for thoroughness. Further, I expect to see in-field research, with citations from advertising, marketing and consumer behaviour journals to indicate that the authors are doing more than grafting an introductory paragraph onto a body of unrelated ideas.

After the references, I next turn to the introductory pages to find out what the authors are doing, why they are doing it and why we should care. If a paper's purpose is not stated on page one, I begin to suspect that the clarity of conceptualisation may be compromised. By page two, I expect the 'So

what?' question to be answered and substantiated – what does the paper contribute to current research? Triggers for scepticism are an authorial claim to have discovered something totally new in the universe on the one hand and, on the other, a lengthy dissertation-ese introduction that repeats what everyone who has read an introductory textbook already knows.

Reading further, I find it useful to remember that even the best data collection, analysis and findings must be based on solid conceptualisation – a weak idea well executed does not advance the research canon. Neither does a sound idea poorly executed, and in this regard I pay particular attention to the sample to determine whether the responses are likely to yield useful and generalisable findings.

In the final reviewing step, evaluating the fate of the paper, I think it more decent to accept papers without nitpicking them to death by checking off the 'accept with minor revisions' box. I also think it kinder to reject papers outright rather than string authors along for five or so rounds of revisions only to reject the paper at the end.

Professor Barbara Stern is Chair of Marketing at Rutgers Business School in Newark, United States. Her research helps advertisers understand consumer behaviour and how to more effectively target customers.

How I regard the art of reviewing

by Albert Caruana

Reviewing is a burden that many of us carry. It is indeed an onerous task. However, when conducted properly it represents an important act of giving and a source of satisfaction. It is an important activity that makes it possible for the community of scholars to maintain and enhance standards and knowledge. You need to have written a few papers yourself before you agree to review since a good reviewer needs to be able to put him/herself a little in the frame of mind of the person(s) submitting the paper. I would like to think that I am not just saying this because it is the correct thing to say.

In truth reviewing is far easier said than done, and I would guess everyone has his or her own way of going about it. Certainly, it would be an uphill struggle to convince me of only one optimum method. I have therefore tried to reflect a little on how I go about conducting a review with as little post hoc rationalisation of the process as possible. Perhaps the main thing I try to do is not leave a manuscript that I have received for too long. Requests for reviews tend to come out of the blue. They often arrive at times when you are already trying to do two or three things. But then, when is it ever a good time? I am the sort of person who likes to get a job out of the way expediently. I have been at the waiting end, indeed who among us has not suffered weeks (or maybe months) of waiting for reviewers' comments on a submitted paper? However, because

of my desire (or compulsion) to deal with outstanding matters quickly, I often opt to leave my initial review on my computer for about a week before I send it off, just in case I was too hasty at the time. When I come to send it off I give it a final read to see if I get any pangs of conscience about having been too hard or not sufficiently fair during the initial review. I try to remind myself how I feel when I read reviewers' comments on some piece I have toiled over.

In terms of actual paper review, what is at the back of my mind is how well it fits into an acceptable research process. I do not have a form that I just tick: because I longed to make the process more objective I had, at least initially, sought to develop a model form that looked at the standard issues. I thus asked the following questions.

- Are the concepts clear?
- Is the paper grounded in theory?
- What exactly is the research focus?
- Is the work interesting in a broad sense?
- Is the operationalisation proper?
- Is the data collection reasonable?
- Are the statistical procedures, if any, applicable?
- Are the implications of the findings of interest to the audience of the journal?
- How are the readers of the journal likely to feel about spending as much time as I have reading this?

Despite these and other questions that I kept adding to the model form as I sought to improve it, I could not seem to get it quite right – the total was never just the sum of the parts. At

least in part, the process remains subjective. Perhaps it is a little like knowledge itself – you cannot ever really say you are done.

Reviewing: simple really, but it is understanding and explaining it properly that is the problem!

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